

China and the US: Similar Frustrations, Different Policies toward North Korea

By Doug Bandow

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SHENYANG, CHINA—China-Korean relations are in a state of flux. The People's Republic of China and South Korea have exchanged presidential visits. Trade statistics suggest that the PRC did not ship any oil to the North during the first quarter of the year. Chinese academics openly speak of Beijing's irritation with its long-time ally.

The cold feelings are reciprocated. Last year North Korea's Kim Jong-un sent an envoy to the PRC to unsuccessfully request an invitation to visit. In December Kim had his uncle, Jang Song-taek, executed. Jang had been the most intimate interlocutor with China and the bill of particulars against him included allegations of dubious dealings with the PRC.

These circumstances suggest the possibility of a significant foreign policy shift in Beijing away from the North and toward the Republic of Korea. For the same reason hopes have risen in Washington for Chinese willingness to cooperate more closely on Korean affairs. To the U.S. that means a readiness to place greater pressure on Pyongyang, more fully enforcing international sanctions, reducing investment, and cutting energy and food aid.

However, the PRC remains unwilling to risk instability by undermining the Kim dynasty. Both America and China are frustrated with the DPRK. However, they continue to view the costs and benefits of the most likely alternative endgames—messy North Korean collapse or unification with the South and alliance with America—very differently.

I recently visited China and held scholarly meetings amid excursions to long-missed tourist sites (such as Mao's Mausoleum!). I also made it to Shenyang, where relations with the North are of great interest because of proximity, if nothing else; the city is about a two hour drive from the Yalu River.

I met one senior scholar who indicated that there was no doubt that Beijing-Pyongyang relations had changed since Kim came to power. The two nations “have a different relationship now and it is becoming colder than ever before.” In contrast, relations between the South and China were “becoming more intense.”

Although the dip in ties between North and PRC was a “big change,” Jang’s execution had been “weighed too heavily by Western researchers,” he indicated. In fact, economic relations had continued, including major infrastructure projects such as bridges over both the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Jang’s fate was a matter of internal North Korea politics, “the result of the natural struggle for power.”

Kim had devoted much effort to reasserting party control over the military. He also moved against officials chosen by Kim Jong-il to help Kim take control of the party. Kim Jong-un had to “get rid of them to hold power to himself.” Jang happened to be the most prominent, and perhaps most unlucky, of them. Now the DPRK has become a “real dictatorship like under his father and his grandfather.”

This doesn’t mean Beijing was happy about Jang’s fate. However, “China had no right to interfere with his execution,” said my colleague. More important, Jang’s ouster “is not the reason for the DPRK’s and China’s bad relations.” Rather, the principal barrier is the North’s continued development of nuclear weapons.

Indeed, Westerners may underestimate the strength of the PRC’s position on this issue. Kim Jong-un wants to visit China. But it is “unimaginable for Chinese officials to invite him when he’s doing nuclear tests. Impossible.”

In return, the North is unhappy over Beijing’s refusal to accommodate Kim as well as the end of oil shipments. “Also, the DPRK is quite angry over the quick development of Chinese relations with South Korea.” But the PRC is not looking back: It is “necessary for China and South Korea to cooperate on the foreign affairs side and in economic matters for mutual benefit.”

This has made Pyongyang “eager to make contact with the U.S.,” an effort which so far has gone nowhere. This is why the Kim regime “took American citizens as hostages” and invited Dennis Rodman to visit, but these tactics “are not working.” The North eventually “shifted the focal point of its foreign relations to Japan.” For the same reason, though “less importantly the DPRK made contact with Russia.”

Economic pressure has eased some on the North, despite sanctions. “Since Kim Jong-un came to power, economic growth has been positive,” the academic indicated, which contrasts to serious contraction under his father. Although the PRC enforces sanctions and some banks have been closed as a result, “the banking sector is very flexible, if one is forbidden another will spring up.”

The PRC is quite interested in U.S.-DPRK relations and Washington’s view of Japan’s move toward Pyongyang. “One of the uniform convictions for both the U.S. and China is no nuclear weapons in the DPRK,” he emphasized. However, in Beijing’s view the

solution is not more sanctions which “everyone has been putting on the DPRK,” but revival of the Six-Party Talks.

This is where agreement between the U.S. and China breaks down. The PRC wants more negotiations, preceded by an American willingness to reduce tensions and Pyongyang’s perceived need for a nuclear arsenal. The U.S. wants the North to make concessions beforehand lest the latest round fail like the many previous efforts.

This clash reflects an even deeper disagreement over competing end states. Both Washington and Beijing oppose a nuclear North Korea.

However, the U.S. would welcome a DPRK collapse, even if messy, and favor reunification with the South. In contrast, China fears both. Worst would be mass refugee flows across the Yalu followed by reunification, with a united Korea allied with America.

As a result, shared frustrations yield different policies.

It isn’t impossible for American and Chinese policymakers to work through their differences. However, it will require understanding the other party’s perspective and offering meaningful concessions to make the deal a positive for both parties. That is, serious and sophisticated diplomacy.

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